Goethe's Conscience

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For Rainer Nägele

Any student or reader of the works by Rainer Nägele knows his insistence on what he calls surface reading. Those who have had the privilege of sitting in his classes will also know his reactions to metaphors of depth, hidden meanings, and truths to be uncovered: They do not belong to the practice of reading. Reading is to discover the textual connections that are out in the open and on the surface; it is about the "carpet of truth," as one of his essays famously ends,[2] and about a "reading of correspondences."[3]

The following reading is inspired by Rainer Nägele's work. I would like to suggest how conscience, or in German *das Gewissen*, can be found as operating on the surface rather than as a deep interior faculty. Conscience might not be governed by deep-seated feelings of right and wrong, but might instead be structured at least partly by almost mechanical linguistic maneuvers and associations. With the help of Rainer Nägele, this is what my reading of Goethe will allow us to consider. Structuring this reading of conscience and of conscience in Goethe, especially in *Faust,* are the subsequent arguments:

[1]My gratitude goes to Andrew Hamilton and Andrea Meyertholen for partly editing and partly translating this text and for Jason Groves for his encouraging critique.

[2]Rainer Nägele, „Benjamin's Ground," in: Rainer Nägele, Ed., *Benjamin's Ground. New Readings of Walter Benjamin*, Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1988, 19–38: 37.

[3]Rainer Nägele, *Echoes of Translation. Reading Between Texts*, Baltimore, London: Johns Hopkins UP, 1997: 10.

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1. Conscience is not a "deep" or "interiorized" faculty of the mind concerned with good and evil. Rather, it comes about if someone fails to have a response. Bad conscience results if one cannot or does not want to rebuff an accusation with a response, be it even a bad excuse. Hence, it is one's task to develop mechanisms of replying to accusations to defend oneself and immunize oneself against attacks.

2. Nevertheless, one cannot or should not shield oneself entirely and has to remain available. Otherwise, one would become limited to mere presence and unreachable by the demands of others.

The following notes are brief and go only a few steps in the direction of these arguments. My hope is that readers will be able to use this sketch as a starting point for their own thoughts.

Conscience

Contemporary discussions of morality usually focus on moral judgment.[4] The implicit idea about morality is the assumed presence of a third-person observer who observes, evaluates, and judges human behavior, including one's own, like a script with interchangeable players. This focus on moral judgment may be in line with legal considerations, but it does not explain the development of moral faculties. Moral development is more likely to begin with a key experience, a first-person experience. Specifically, contemporary theorists often locate the beginning of moral development in the experience of being a victim. For example, the Nobel Prize winner Amartya Sen begins his account of morality by quoting Dickens: "there is nothing so finely perceived and finely felt, as injustice."[5]

Following Goethe (and Rainer Nägele's readings of Goethe), I will suggest, however, that a primal scene of morality is actually that of being an agent and perpetrator. It is bad conscience that forces us, through its nagging insistence, to confront our actions. In the case of bad conscience, the experience is shaped by *Nachträglichkeit* (belatedness); that is to say, it comes about later and in a way structured by codifications of language that mark an event as morally "bad." The

[4]Of course, this is a tradition that goes back to Kant. For an influential contemporary approach, see Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind. Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religio*n, New York: Pantheon, 2012.

[5]Amartya Sen, *The Idea of Justice*, Cambridge, Mass: Harvard UP, 2009, vii.

"first" experience is already a later reflection. We may not have a bad conscience because we did something wrong, but because someone, perhaps an inner voice, accuses us afterwards that we did something wrong. As opposed to a simple delay in time, *Nachträglichkeit* involves, as Rainer Nägele puts it, a "rupture of continuity" and a shift to the domain of language.[6]

What is bad conscience and how does it come about?

It helps to look at certain contemporary notions of conscience, the most prominent of which are probably the ones deriving from Jean Piaget's famous model of the formation of conscience. Lawrence Kohlberg, building on Piaget's suggestion, has divided the stages of moral development (conscience) into three types: pre-conventional (avoiding punishment), conventional (following norms) and post-conventional (comparing norms).[7] The idea is that we all learn moral action by means of a step-by-step "interiorization" of norms, beginning with the first phase of simply acting in order to avoid punishment. Bad conscience emerges when we act against the interiorized norms.

It is not too difficult to discern an interesting blending of this new conscience with a certain idea of the "unconscious:" According to the Piaget-Kohlberg model, the moral norms of conscience sink deep into some space that is hidden from awareness. Here the Piaget-Kohlberg model aligns with the quite problematic tradition involving modernist metaphors of interiorization, depth, and psychology in the twentieth century.

As it pertains to conscience, the Piaget-Kohlberg model implies that we should be able to assume that everyone who has interiorized certain norms shares a moral platform of moral decision-making. By this logic we must conclude that criminals and other wrongdoers are either mentally disabled (and lack conscience) or are haunted by a bad conscience.

This, I believe, is a false conclusion. Mentally sound people can be free of bad conscience even if they have committed a crime. Instead, I would suggest that conscience operates more like the site of rhetorical speeches of accusation and defense, as some older notions of conscience proposed. While I do not have sufficient space and time

[6]On *Nachträglichkeit*, see Rainer Nägele, „Beyond Psychology: Freud, Benjamin, and the Articulation of Modernity," in: Rainer Nägele, *Theater, Theory, Speculation: Walter Benjamin and the Scenes of Modernity*, Baltimore, London: Johns Hopkins UP, 1991, 54–77: 76. Also: Rainer Nägele, *Reading After Freud: Essays on Goethe, Hölderlin, Habermas, Nietzsche, Brecht, Celan, and Freud*, New York: Columbia UP, 1987.

[7]See Lawrence Kohlberg, *The Philosophy of Moral Development: Moral Stages and the Idea of Justice (Essays on Moral Development)*, New York: Harper & Row, 1981, Vol. 1.

here to revisit the rich intellectual history of conscience prior to the invention of the unconscious in the late eighteenth century, it should be noted that many thinkers imagined conscience to be out in the open, as a mental drama in one's awareness.[8]

If this is correct, bad conscience would emerge if one lacks a proper response to allegations. What I refer to as a proper response goes beyond the justification to include any speech that provides an excuse if someone is willing to believe in it. To omit this rhetorical dimension of the accusation and thereby the dialogical possibilities of a response would reduce (or change) conscience to a mere moral measure of good and bad behavior (*synderesis* as Thomas Aquinas had it).

These thoughts suggest, in all their brevity, that conscience may not be well described by means of unconscious norms, but rather by the model of the older eighteenth-century conscience, prior to its contact with the newly codified unconscious, understood as a deep interior faculty of the mind. According to the earlier models, conscience is not a naturalized, deeper sense of norms, but instead a collection of rhetorical replies. Bad conscience emerges once we are forced to "hold on" to an accusation—or have decided to do so—and do not voice a response or excuse to brush it off.

To summarize: The suggestion is that "conscience" has a narrative-dialogical-linguistic form.[9] Such a dialogical form is indicated in the term "responsibility:" When accused of a crime or moral shortcoming, we are obligated to "respond."[10] In terms of conscience, this means that we have a "bad conscience" when we do not have a proper "response." Certainly, we can choose from many types of "adequate" responses which could serve to deflect or parry the accusation in our mind, such as in a fencing match. Such response tactics might include:

– a rhetoric of honesty (confession): One does not need to have a bad conscience, or has less of it, when one is honest and confesses;

– a rhetoric of forgiveness (plea): One does not need to have a bad conscience, or has less of it, when one begs for forgiveness;

[8]For a first orientation see Hans Reiner, "Gewissen," in: *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie,* edited by Joachim Ritter, Karlfried Gründer, and Gottfried Gabriel, Basel and Stuttgart: Scheidegger & Spiess, 1974, Vol. 2, 574–592; Josef Bordat, *Das Gewissen*, Bonn: Lepanto, 2012; and more specifically about seventeenth-century casuistic: Albert R. Jonsen & Stephen Toulmin, *The Abuse of Casuistry. A History of Moral Reasoning*, Berkeley: California UP, 1988.

[9]For a less sketchy account, see Fritz Breithaupt, *Kultur der Ausrede*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2012.

[10]For a general theory of "Antwortlichkeit," see Bernhard Waldenfels, *Antwortregister*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2007.

– a rhetoric of excuse: One does not need to have a bad conscience, or has less of it, when one finds a context in which one's actions might be justified;

– a rhetoric of distraction: One does not need to have a bad conscience, or has less of it, when one can find a distraction and point to other events, perhaps other morally relevant behavior, and then neglect the "inner voice" of conscience.

Conscience itself would operate as the "inner voice" of prosecution as many writers throughout the ages have described it. However, this voice is not a voice of depth or an interior unconscious. It is a voice, I suggest, that is much more the effect of unanswered attack. It has the appearance of depth only because it has no proper place and escaped the rhetoric of the reply.

Goethe's *Iphigenie auf Tauris*

Goethe introduces the issue of morality in his writings through a similar analogy: Morality comes as an attack against which one has to defend oneself. Goethe's question is how one can avoid a bad conscience, one initiated by the allegations and demands of others.

Generally speaking, Goethe is not typically regarded as a moral thinker or practitioner. His 'wild marriage' to Christiane Vulpius scandalized his contemporaries, as did his revealing poetry, and his idiosyncratic attitude towards religion seems to rule out much respect for morality on his part. Even within literary studies in the last fifty years, the question of conscience and morality in Goethe has only been consistently addressed in terms of *Iphigenie auf Tauris*, most prominently by Adorno.[11] In the case of *Faust,* the attractive representation of evil gets more consideration than actual questions of morality. But this misses two things. The first is that Goethe pursued and rewrote the structure of conscience developed in *Iphigenie auf Tauris* throughout his later work. The second is that Goethe's invention of Mephistopheles as a radical reinterpretation of the "inner voice" may have had a greater effect on the cultural forms of conscience than the various philosophi-

[11]Theodor W. Adorno, "Zum Klassizismus von Goethes *Iphigenie*", in: Theodor W. Adorno, *Noten zur Literatur*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1981, 495–514; some recent works include: Thomas Berger, *Der Humanitätsgedanke in der Literatur der deutschen Spätaufklärung* Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 2008; Horst Lange, "Isaac, Iphigeneia, Christ: Human Sacrifice and the Semiotics of the Divine", in: *Publications of the English Goethe Society* 78:3 (2009), 166–88; and Michael Mandelartz, "Die reine Seele und die Politik: Partikularität und Universalität in Goethes *Iphigenie*", in: *Goethe Yearbook* 16 (2009): 17–68.

cal constructions of ethics in the nineteenth century. Although this essay is concerned with both threads, the emphasis of our reading will concern *Faust*. First, however, a brief discussion of *Iphigenie auf Tauris* is needed to provide orientation and contrast to *Faust*.

In Goethe's most classical play, Orestes must defend himself against accusations and free himself from bad conscience after killing his mother. Bad conscience comes to him in the form of the Erinyes (*Erinnyen*). These Erinyes reach him via chains of associations: Whenever Orestes is reminded somehow of his murderous act, the Erinyes appear.

> Den Flüchtigen verfolgt ihr schneller Fuß;
> Sie geben nur um neu zu schrecken Rast[12]

When his long-lost sister asks him about his family heritage, his fate is recalled and Orestes suspects that the unknown woman in front of him is one of the Erinyes. Wherever Orestes goes, the Erinyes appear, coming on the heels of his memories. These memories expand metonymically by association. In the earlier versions of the play, the Erinyes were called "Erinnen," evoking the German word for memory (*Erinnern*).

Once the Erinyes have been recalled, they darken his perception to such a degree that he falls into an abyss and cannot distinguish between present and absent figures, between the past and present. Haunted by the calls of the Erinyes, conscience, Orestes mistakes his friends for them and falls prey to madness. The Erinyes issue no accusation and invite no defense; rather, as shadows, they are the very punishment he receives. His friends, as well as Iphigenie, lament:

> O nehmt den Wahn ihm von dem starren Auge,
> Daß uns der Augenblick ...nicht...elend mache. (1215–17)[13]

Returning to the question of conscience, this means that conscience dissolves the present moment and removes a person (Orestes) into his own past, to the point that it becomes unclear what is present and what is past. The memories, i.e. the Erinyes, the forms of conscience, are simulacra that make it impossible for Orestes to distinguish past from present. His deed lives on in the Erinyes as madness and only as madness. Orestes' punishment for his matricide is precisely this obfuscation of the present which in turn begets his blindness before his own sister.

[12]Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Iphigenie auf Tauris*, in: *Sämtliche Werke. Frankfurter Ausgabe* (FA), Frankfurt: Klassiker Verlag, 1984–, Vol. I. 5, Vers 1069–70.
[13]Goethe, *Iphigenie*, Vers 1215–17.

The similarity in form and content to the definition of trauma is clear: Trauma is a failure of the memory function which cannot properly catalogue a past event as past. As a result, the past event persists in the present in the form of flashbacks, dreams, and hallucinations, or for Orestes, as manifested in the shadowy Erinyes. The Erinyes as substitutes for conscience are not seeking satisfaction for a crime committed; they are themselves the punishment.

Goethe's cure for this persevering past is light. Light is the present, a presence into which the past and its memories disappear. In the light of the moment (*Augenblick*) only that persists which has a future. Light is presented as a power emanating forth from the subject and reflected in the objects at hand. Goethe takes this description of sight from Plotinus, who believed that the eyes felt out the world by emitting rays like the sun. Light only brings forth a reflection from things that are actually there. As a manifestation of light and sun, Orestes can recognize himself and his sister and thus reclaim his feeling for the present.[14] Either the simulacra-shadows turn into images of something present, or they dissolve into nothing, as the Erinyes do. This means they become either truly part of the present, or are simply cast off as memories.

To follow this line of thinking then, the challenge at hand is less a matter of relegating the past into the past (as twentieth-century trauma theory seeks to do), than of recognizing the present for what it is. Here we might be reminded of Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, whose insistence on presence is foreshadowed in Goethe's play.[15] In *Iphigenie* (acts 1–3), we find no moral engagement with questions of guilt and no regret oriented at the past, but rather a rediscovery of the present in the person of the sister. Instead of the psychoanalytical process of working through the past, part of the solution is simply to forget it. Of course, Orestes might have been able to sidestep charges of guilt because his action was emotionally justified and legally not culpable. But except for the one just outlined, there is no moral or ethical process of coming to terms with the past until later in the play when Iphigenie and Thoas take center stage. Conscience takes the form of a traumatic guilt, thereby robbing the present of its sole claim to reality.

This short account of the optical-visual conception of conscience in *Iphigenie auf Tauris* is meant to outline the starting point for Goethe's subsequent engagement with conscience. For Goethe and for Orestes

[14]See Goethe, *Iphigenie*, 1317–24.

[15]See Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey*, Stanford: Stanford UP, 2003.

the connotation of conscience and morality is simply negative: It is best to get away from them. In response to the question of how, the play offers full presence as the answer. Coming to terms with conscience does not require listening to a deep inner truth (and Goethe will also rewrite the voice of Hamlet's father in *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*) or responding to the shadow-Erinyes, but rather sending the voices of the depth back to the underworld and dissolving the shadows. What was thought to be a phenomenon of depth (Erinyes from the Underworld), dissolves like mere shadows on the surface.

Faust's *Augen-Blick* as critique of conscience

It is in *Faust* that Goethe makes this form of conscience a central issue. The idea I am presenting can be expressed succinctly: Faust is a cousin of Orestes.[16] But whereas Orestes must be cured from a madness of conscience that darkens his present, Faust, on the other hand, must remain accessible to the demands of conscience. The Faust that Mephistopheles tries to create is a perfected, and by that I mean perverted, version of Orestes: His present seals itself off and becomes untouchable to material accusations. No Erinyes would dare trouble this product of the devil. The complete immunization of conscience would be the cult of the moment without any regard for the past. The danger faced by the God of the prologue consists of not hearing the devil any more—and the greatness of God is to be able to hear the devil, as Hegel puts it (perhaps thinking of Goethe's *Faust*).[17] When the present distills itself into an absolute or pure present, a manifestly fulfilled moment, it is removed from thoughts of other times, the thoughts of other people and what happens to them. In this sense, it is evil. The result would be a Faust without conscience, lost to the devil.

In the dialogue between Faust and Mephistopheles, the two show how they can parry one another's thrusts. Whoever has a counterpoint or a reply is not plagued by conscience (we would not expect that Mephistopheles would be, anyway). The more strongly Faust is taken by the possibility that a response can suffice, the more unlikely it becomes that any thought of conscience could reach him. Mephistopheles' task is to bind Faust to the present, as the bet is meant to do, and thus make him numb to conscience. Mephistopheles is also there to goad

[16]Benjamin Bennett has expressed a related idea of the genealogy of Orestes and Faust, see Benjamin Bennett, *Beyond Theory: Eighteenth-Century German Literature and the Poetics of Irony*, Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1993, 203.

[17]Georg Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel, *Die Phänomenologie des Geistes*, chapter „Gewissen."

Faust on and thereby to immunize him. Faust's task meanwhile is to remain open to something beyond the present.

The tone between them allows the constant parrying and reversal of a charge into a countercharge. Gretchen, on the other hand, cannot or does not want to escape the voice of conscience, and so is driven into captivity by the voice of the Evil Spirit (*böser Geist*). It is a sign of her moral quality that she hears the voice of conscience and does not reply to defend herself. To be more precise: By letting the whispering of the *Geist* stand without a reply, Gretchen raises it to the voice of conscience.

Precisely this need to listen to the other is at stake in the wager. Goethe famously added this scene, the *große Lücke*, after a long hiatus and thus completed *Faust*. Faust states that he could never be satisfied with an illusion, and could never misinterpret an illusion as reality.

> Werd' ich beruhigt je mich auf ein Faulbett legen:
> So sei es gleich um mich getan!
> Kannst du mich schmeichelnd je belügen
> Daß ich mir selbst gefallen mag,
> Kannst du mich mit Genuß betriegen:
> Das sei für mich der letzte Tag! (1692–97)

As a consequence of this claim, he can only offer a bet–specifically a pact in the form of an "if-then."[18] The point is not that Faust claims that he would recognize any illusion, but rather that he would reject any illusion once he had recognized it (instead of trying to expand it "mit Genuß," "with pleasure").

> Werd' ich zum Augenblicke sagen:
> Verweile doch! Du bist so schön!
> Dann magst du mich in Fesseln schlagen …(1699–1701)

The moment, the *Augen-Blick* addressed here as a "Du," is at its core a moment of sight. It is a shot of a present moment, a self-contained, unique presence. Accepting the sight of this moment as the only reality would be to recognize it without another *Augen-Blick*, second viewing, or possibility of other realities; without the influence of the past and without the approach of a visually-conceived conscience. Should Faust accept this singular, insular and unrepeatable moment, then he has been the victim of an illusion and is lost to the devil. Mephistopheles is not the devil because he is evil, but because he suppresses the other-

[18]About the articulation of the wager, see Werner Hamacher, "Faust, Geld" in: *Athenäum: Jahrbuch für Romantik* 4 (1994): 131–187: 133–34.

ness of the moment. The devil resides in this fixation on the present, which is raised to the status of an absolute when all other possible present moments, including those lived by others, are shut out. Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht has described this impoverished, pure presence as a presence without latency.[19] For Goethe's *Faust* this pure presence without latency is the incarnation of evil.

Now the opposite side, namely the one occupied by an open and moral self, is not simply some fulfilled selfhood. What does it mean to remain approachable as a subject, to be aware in one's acts of more than one reality? In a related context, Rainer Nägele notices the splitting effects of conscience already in *Egmont*:

> Die Diskrepanz, ja die Inkommensurabilität zwischen Wirkung, Geschehen und dem Ich als denkendem, planendem, handelndem Subjekt zieht sich als Grundton durch das Stück. Das Zitat, das Autobiographie und Drama verwebt, spricht es aus. Es spricht in dem Moment sich aus, wo die Sorge eines andern zur planenden Vorsicht mahnt. Sowohl Egmont wie der Goethe der Autobiographie evozieren leidenschaftlich die Macht von etwas Anderem da, wo sie als überlegendes und überlegenes Ich zum Handeln aufgerufen werden. In einer eigentümlichen Dialektik fühlt Egmont sich da von sich entfremdet, findet Fremdes in sich, wo die Sorge eines andern ihn drängen möchte, planend und bewußt zu handeln. […] Wenn einmal von Egmonts Handeln als Akt des Gewissens die Rede ist, erscheint es unter dem Vorbehalt des Scheins und eines Gewissens, das in die nächste Nähe zum Dämonischen gleite.[20]

Remaining aware of more than the sealed off presence, which includes being ethical, divides the subject; it splits it and leads it to a place from which no splinter of the split self can utter "I." This splitting leads back to the trauma of Orestes who lacks a unified presence. What appears to be a dilemma in *Egmont* and *Iphigenie* turns out to be hope for Faust. Faust bets Mephistopheles that he will not be captured by the moment, that his present will always remain open to other possibilities and otherness, in other words, split. His two (or more) souls are his hope. This is the possibility that things may turn out to be or turn into something else ("the quicksilver"). It is the otherness that extends

[19]Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *After 1945: Latency as Origin of the Present*, Stanford: Stanford UP, 2013. Gumbrecht links this latency to moral demands as well: „For the first time [around 1970, F.B.], I began to perceive an atmosphere of latency in my surroundings, and I understood that the true challenge for a German like myself, born in the years immediately following the war, involved assuming personal responsibility and guilt—paradoxically, for crimes that happened before I was born" (175).

[20]Rainer Nägele, „Ach Ich: Egmonts Wirken-Goethes Schreiben," in: *Goethe Yearbook*, Volume 11 (2002), 213–227 : 222–3.

beyond a moment of rest (the "Faulbett"), and it is the otherness of phenomena that Goethe places at the center of his morphological texts, where every phenomenon is more than it seems to be in any isolated moment. This otherness is the splitting plurality of the ego, and it is the reality of the other that the voice of conscience reminds us of. It is not an otherness of some hidden depth, but of looking to the side, seeing what or who is next to you and what is already fully visible, but has escaped notice so far. It means seeing the shadows and being exposed to the demonic.

In *Faust,* the phenomenon of the moment is an ethical affair. Faust cannot or should not repel the Erinyes-like charges. He cannot simply forget Gretchen or simply seal off his present, but must recall both during the wild flood of images comprising the Walpurgisnacht. And yet, it is exactly this accessibility of memory with its pure presence that ends the disconnected, though attractive, hocus pocus of the Walpurgisnacht.[21]

So how does one remain open to more than oneself and the one moment, open to ethical demands and to latency? Simply being an upright character with good moral intentions is not the answer, according to Goethe. No inner and better voice saves Faust by reminding him of Gretchen. No accusation confronts him. Rather, it is an association that saves him. Like the associations tying Orestes to his past, Faust's associations call back images of Gretchen, and in the process crack open possibilities of a different present.

I would like to draw attention to the following scene, which ends the Walpurgisnacht and rescues Faust by reminding him of Gretchen when, in the midst of the confusion, Faust sees a strange, still sight:

FAUST: Mephisto, siehst du dort
Ein blasses, schönes Kind allein und ferne stehen? [...]
Ich muss bekennen, dass mir deucht,
Dass sie dem guten Gretchen gleicht.
MEPH. Laß das nur stehn! dabei wird's niemand wohl.
Es ist ein Zauberbild, ist leblos, ein Idol.
Ihm zu begegnen, ist nicht gut;
Vom starren Blick erstarret des Menschen Blut,
Und er wird fast in Stein verkehrt,
Von der Meduse hast du ja gehört.

[21]We cannot even begin a full ethical appraisal of the Walpurgisnacht here. For an introduction, see two opposite assessments: Albrecht Schöne, *Götterzeichen, Liebeszauber, Satanskult: Neue Einblicke in alte Goethetexte*, München: Fink, 1982; and Thomas Zabka, "Dialektik des Bösen: Warum es in Goethes 'Walpurgisnacht' keinen Satan gibt", in: *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift* 72 (1998), 201–26.

FAUST. Fürwahr, es sind die Augen eines Toten [...]
FAUST. Wie sonderbar muß diesen schönen Hals
Ein einzig rotes Schnürchen schmücken,
Nicht breiter als ein Messerrücken! (4183–4205)

To be sure, the scene describes how Faust is reminded of Gretchen, but at the same time, this memory does not come in the form one would usually associate with conscience. There is no allegation of wrongdoing, no cricket whispering advice. Instead, we encounter a type of image not usually held in particularly high regard by Goethe: an idol (*Idol, Zauberbild*). What is special about this idol?

Faust's vision here is called "leblos," another unusual occurrence in Goethe's vocabulary. More typical is the association of image with life, as in the *tableaux vivants* of the *Wahlverwandtschaften*. In this novel, the living images with Ottilie "live" because they show the light and manifold possibilities of future development.[22] Living images have a future. Still, the "dead image" also appears in the *Wahlverwandtschaften*, for instance in the novella contained within the novel. In this short narrative, a young neighbor girl attempts to commit suicide to punish a young neighbor boy: "Er sollte ihr totes Bild nicht loswerden, er sollte nicht aufhören, sich Vorwürfe zu machen."[23] Here the dead image persists, lasts, and cannot be changed. The "dead image" of this "tote Bild" is a threat to the present, as suggested by Mephistopheles' reference to Medusa, and in close proximity to the Erinyes from *Iphigenie auf Tauris* (where, incidentally, we also find a reference to Medusa).[24]

In *Faust,* however, the *tote Bild* does not scream. Instead, it remains quiet and the task of ignoring it is left up to Faust. So why doesn't he? The answer seems to lie in the final lines:

Wie sonderbar muß diesen schönen Hals
Ein einzig rotes Schnürchen schmücken,
Nicht breiter als ein Messerrücken!

In the blink of an eye, Faust moves from necklace to knife and from beauty to murder. In fact, by adoring the beauty of the neck, he draws a line of association, a line which at first glimpse appears as a string of jewelry but then turns out to be the bloody contour of a knife cut. Of course, such a line is also the line of text, as wide as the back of a knife, which draws its own association (and rhyme) between *schmücken*

[22]See Fritz Breithaupt, *Jenseits der Bilder: Goethes Politik der Wahrnehmung*, Freiburg: Rombach, 2000, ch. 4. Rainer Nägele was one of my mentors when I wrote this book.
[23]Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Die Wahlverwandtschaften*, part II, chapter 10.
[24]Goethe, *Iphigenie*, Vers 1162–63.

and *Messerrücken*. This necklace-blood-line is not part of the visible; rather it is Faust's addition to what he sees.

Remaining truthful to the logic of the dead image, which insists on and even disallows the transformation into a different (living) future, Faust adds only a line of death. He kills the lifeless image, but by doing so, also inscribes himself into the image. This chain then becomes the trace of a murderous act for which Faust himself becomes the prime suspect. This associative type of inscription is certainly not a canonical form of remorse. However, it proves to be a way of letting conscience in, at least in the sense hinted at before, namely as splitting the subject and opening the present to more than one reality. Simultaneously, Faust recognizes and mistakes, decorates and kills Gretchen. What we see in this scene, then, is Goethe's version of conscience at work. In this version, Faust does not hear an inner voice of morality; he starts with what he sees and expands it with visual and literal associations, decorates the image, thereby inscribing himself onto its surface.

Faust kills the idol twice: First by calling the image dead (*Augen eines Toten)*, then by adding a reason for death (*Messerrücken*). He uses the blood to literally write himself into the image, and can ultimately decipher himself in the act. "Know thyself," the motto of the Tower Society in *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*, is made possible through this interpretative act: the one who works associatively on and with an image can recognize his own contribution to it. Images reprimand their observers. In this case, the associative act with the red necklace opens not only Faust's playful present at the Walpurgisnacht, but at the same time his culpability in the past. The present, including the work with the image, opens another dimension and another time. (Next time we see Faust, he is enraged at Mephistopheles and himself for what he has done to Gretchen.)

Faust and Orestes are cousins in that a visually-represented conscience approaches them both. But while Orestes' challenge is in the deflection of conscience in order to avoid madness, Faust must let it in and face his own guilt. During the great gap in his work on *Faust*, Goethe revises the essentially negative conception of conscience presented by the Erinyes, and comes to recognize the "dead image" as a cure against the sealed-off moment.

Contrary to the consistent prejudice against him, Goethe is not simply an apologist of the moment. It is in the moment that he finds legitimacy in the claims of others as well as the claim of conscience. Even the often-celebrated hypostasis of the single moment shows that the moment must remain open to other possibilities, to memories, to

other people, to latency, and to conscience. The famed aesthetic of the moment emerges as an otherness of the moment. Even the pale idol during the Walpurgisnacht plays a part in this opening of the moment.

Taken together, the lesson of *Iphigenie* and *Faust* is that the subject is caught between two extremes with only a questionable middle ground. Scylla and Charybdis appear between the haunted Orestes and the numb Faust. The only hope is offered in an expressionless idol with the *Augen eines Toten*, with the "Eyes of a Skull."

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To conclude, if my reading holds, Goethe develops a complex form of moral thinking. This moral thinking, however, would not be well served and is not well described by notions of moral judgment or conscience as in the Piaget-Kohlberg model. Instead, it is a morality that opens up the moment to more than that one moment, and the self to the other. Goethe also offers a way to shift my opening suggestions about conscience. There I perhaps a bit hastily suggested that bad conscience emerges if one does not reply. To illustrate the primal scene of conscience, I subsequently presented the scene staged as a court of law, complete with accusation and defense, allegation and excuse. However, the theatricality of this scene may already be overstated. What we call conscience may be an effect of letting words and images insist and persist.

Nevertheless, as Rainer Nägele reminds us, the rearticulation of a conscience-of-depth as a conscience-on-the-surface still involves payment. The moral debt (*Schuld*) rests on an older economic debt (*Schuld*) of having to repay. With Anaximander, he articulates:

> [...] Anaximander inscribes *Dasein* into a context of debt and/or guilt that is not yet defined in an ethical sphere but that approaches the prejected *Dasein* as *Vorwurf* in the sense of an objection and reproach that demand some kind of toll. This toll has a wide range of coins and payments from the small slips and detours of our tongues and movement to the ultimate toll of death [...][25]

[25]Rainer Nägele, „The Eyes of the Skull: Benjamin's Aesthetics," in: *Theater, Theory Speculation*, 135–166: 115–6.